

## EVANGELICALS AND POLITICS: A RETHINKING\*

*David P. Gushee\*\**

### INTRODUCTION

I understand my primary task in this essay to be to take you inside the world of evangelical political reflection and engagement. Though I actually grew up Roman Catholic and attended the liberal Union Theological Seminary in New York, I am by now an evangelical insider, rooted deeply in red state mid-South America, a member of a Southern Baptist church (actually, an ordained minister), a teacher at a Tennessee Baptist university, and a columnist for the flagship Christianity Today magazine. Due to the blue state/red state, liberal/conservative boundary-crossing that has characterized my background, I am often called upon to interpret our divided internal “cultures” one to another. Trained to be fair-minded and judicious in my analysis and judgments (though not always successful in meeting the standards of my training), I seek to help bridge the culture wars divide that is tearing our nation apart.

As one deeply invested in American evangelicalism, most of my attention these days now goes to the internal conversation within evangelical life about our identity and mission, especially our social ethics and political engagement. In this essay I will focus extensively on problems I currently see with evangelical political engagement, addressing those from within the theological framework of evangelical Christianity and inviting others to listen in to what I am now saying to my fellow evangelicals.

But first, to lighten the mood a bit and give you a sense of my own experiences at the intersection of faith and politics, I want to tell you a few stories.

---

\* This speech, entitled “Religious Americans and Political Choices,” was delivered at Hamline University Symposium on Law, Religion & Ethics (Hamline U. Sch. of L., St. Paul, Minn., Oct. 6, 2006).

\*\* Distinguished University Professor of Christian Ethics, Mercer University, Atlanta, Georgia. He is the author or editor of nine books and is a leading evangelical voice on ethical issues.

## VIGNETTES

In 1979, I was a brand new seventeen-year-old “baby Christian” (as we used to call it), a fresh convert to evangelical Christianity in its Southern Baptist form. I lived in northern Virginia, land of the federal government, secret government agencies, and myriad lobbying groups. My father worked for the Congressional Research Service of the Library of Congress, doing energy and environmental policy analysis.

A woman in my church approached me that spring with a lucrative offer: would I be willing to appear briefly in a film that her organization was making? I would receive two hundred dollars for just a few hours’ work. With prom approaching, the money sounded awfully nice.

So it was that I found myself with dyed brown hair, dressed in a Soviet Army uniform, on the set of *Can Soviet Imperialism Be Stopped?* My job was to pour a bucket of red paint over a standing globe, beginning in the vicinity of West Germany. I need to report that I was excellent that day. I poured the paint just right, was handed the money after one take, and went on to the prom the very next night, dyed but flush with cash.

I didn’t really understand at the time that I was making a propaganda film for one of the most hard line right-wing organizations in America, Howard Phillips’s Conservative Caucus. This group still exists. Sadly, though, there is no mention of this great film on their website.

By 1986 I had graduated from William and Mary and come under the influence of the progressive wing of Protestant Christianity. I worked for a peace organization in Louisville while attending Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. (I am not making this up.) I supported the nuclear freeze campaign, which led to a particularly memorable moment one wintry evening in Chicago, circa 1987. Jesse Jackson was running for president. He was scheduled to speak to the freeze group on this frozen night. He came in late, sitting down right next to me on the front row. He tapped my shoe, saying “How ya’ doin?” *Yes, Jesse Jackson sat next to me and tapped my left shoe.* The crowd shouted “Run, Jesse, Run.”

From 1987 to 1989 I lived in New York City where I pursued a doctorate in ethics at Union Seminary. I had gone there in part to broaden my horizons after lengthy immersion in Southern Baptist culture. I loved my ethics program at Union but culturally and theologically often felt like a stranger in a strange land.

One day, the National Association of Evangelicals sent Catholic intellectual George Weigel to Union Seminary to talk to the school's few evangelicals. (This choice illustrates the paucity of the evangelical community's own intellectual resources at the time; they had to borrow a Catholic. The NAE's decision to send Weigel also showed that it had embraced the hard right line on the Cold War, and foreshadowed the eventual alliance between conservative Catholics and evangelicals.) We gathered in the Bonhoeffer Room, where Weigel tried to disabuse us of any peacenik inclinations or ideas of moral equivalence in relation to the Soviet Union or nuclear weapons. A few years later, the Soviet Union was dead, ending that particular argument.

In 1990, I needed a job. Halfway through a doctoral program, with a child and another on the way, I interviewed for an editorial position with *The Other Side*, a radical evangelical magazine located across from an abandoned house in the depressed Germantown section of inner-city Philadelphia. Based on a deep commitment to economic justice, they were offering poverty-level wages to all their staff. During the interview one staff member helpfully told me that she trash-picked to supplement her income. I fled, vowing never to return. (Not exactly, but that's how I remember it.) A few months later I took a position with Ron Sider (author of the critically important book *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*)<sup>1</sup> and his group Evangelicals for Social Action (ESA), living just around the corner from that abandoned house. I never did take up trash-picking. I did, however, find with ESA the kernel of a social-political vision that has never left me—pro-life, pro-justice, pro-peace, pro-poor, pro-creation care.

In 1992-93 I was working at ESA, finishing my doctorate, and looking without much success for my first teaching post. Finally I got the chance to interview at Southern Seminary, my alma mater. I got the job. I was on campus the same day that Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr. was named president of Southern. The school swung sharply to the right. In just a few years, dozens of faculty left or were forced out. I myself left in 1996.

As an evangelical in an influential ethics post formerly held by a pro-choice professor, for a time I had numerous opportunities to enter the inner sanctum of the conservative Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), a hugely influential part of the Christian Right to this day. I drafted a 1994 SBC statement condemning the killing of abortion doctors, when that was a hot issue. I remember the drafting meeting,

---

1. Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in Age of Hunger* (20<sup>th</sup> anniversary ed., Thomas Nelson 1990).

high up in an executive suite in Nashville, where most of the Powers in the SBC gathered together to pick through the text that I had written. The denomination at the time was essentially dominated by about sixty men. The most influential fifteen of them were in that room with me. The next year I had a similar experience working with a top-level group on the SBC repudiation of its historic racism. It was thrilling. But such involvement soon ended. I was cut out of the loop because I publicly dissented from the SBC's boycott of the Disney Corporation.

Right, left, left, right—today I identify with what I call an emerging evangelical center, neither left nor right. It can be found in the editorial pages of *Christianity Today*, in the classrooms of most seriously Christian colleges, in the current vision of ESA, in the thoughtful scholarship/advocacy of the Center for Public Justice, in the *For the Health of the Nation* statement approved by the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), and in the public affairs office of Rich Cizik, NAE's man in Washington. This evangelical center, I believe, offers the best way forward for us in the notoriously controversial engagement of our faith with American public life.

And yet it is not quite good enough to say we should move to the center from the right and the left. Any right-center-left language is political, borrowed from the world. We need a Biblically grounded rethinking of our entire engagement with American culture. I daresay that comment is relevant to all religious engagement with politics in America.

#### UNCONTESTABLE FACTS

Little can be said about this issue without evoking controversy, but I would suggest that there are four uncontestable facts related to evangelicals and politics today:

*Conservative evangelical ("Christian Right") political activism is evoking a heated backlash.* This backlash comes from dissident evangelicals (Jim Wallis, Greg Boyd, Randall Balmer, Brian McLaren, George Hunter, Michael Horton, Ed Dobson/Cal Thomas, Jimmy Carter), from the non-evangelical Christian center and left (John Danforth, Mark Taylor, Barry Lynn, Robin Meyers, Becky Garrison), and from many other voices from the non-Christian left (Michael Lerner, Garry Wills, Thomas Frank). This backlash is in turn evoking a counter-backlash, with various defenses of the Christian Right now on offer. And, of course, the Christian Right understands itself as a defensive movement, in other words, a reaction to prior challenges to traditional Christian values. So they would reject any idea that the

problem begins with *them*.

*Battles over evangelical involvement with politics are merging into the broader “culture wars” environment that is tearing our country apart.* It is increasingly difficult to distinguish a particularly Christian voice in the red state/blue state, right/left polarization of American public discourse. Conservatives like Ann Coulter, Rush Limbaugh, and Rammesh Ponuru do not speak as “Christian thinkers” but their arguments hit religious themes. The Left is only now finding its religious voice (through such thinkers as Michael Lerner, Jim Wallis, and others) but is (increasingly) trying to fire back with religious themes in this deeply religious nation—and the Democratic Party is paying close attention. The screeching tone of the argument (it’s not a conversation) is contributing to the depressing—even dangerous—polarization of American society and the loss of a sensible center, despite what ought to be soothing evidence that most average Americans aren’t really culture warriors at all.

*Many sense that our culture is in crisis, but see the church as part of the problem rather than part of the solution.* Political divisions, hatred of the cultural “enemy,” fiscal irresponsibility, growing income inequality, eroding international standing, government gridlock, business and political corruption, religio-ethnic balkanization, special-interest politics, endless political gamesmanship, the disappearance of statesmanship—these and many other problems threaten our nation. Yet the church seems unable to rise above these problems; instead it is enmeshed in the culture wars, in backlash upon backlash, conflict upon conflict.

*A growing number of visible evangelicals, including Billy Graham himself, are disillusioned with politics, especially with evangelical engagement in politics.* They sense that something has gone dramatically wrong, and they are attempting to call the church back to its core mission. They need to be heard. It’s time for a complete rethinking of evangelical politics.

#### NON-NEGOTIABLE CONVICTIONS

While in this essay I cannot do more than sketch such a rethinking, I will suggest eight non-negotiable convictions. Again, my words come from within the discourse of orthodox, evangelical Christianity. They are not intended to offend those who are not Christians; they have their own discourse, and hopefully can find striking points of overlap with mine.

1. *God is redeeming the world in and through Jesus Christ,<sup>2</sup> not earthly politics.* The Biblical narrative must be our narrative; its story of how the world is being redeemed must be our story and must govern our priorities and actions. The Kingdom belongs to God, and it gains ground in the way God determines. There is no ultimate human redemption available through politics.

2. *The church's primary obligation is to follow Jesus.<sup>3</sup>* As a community of Christ-followers, the church exists to worship God-in-Christ, to preach the Word, to make disciples, to serve the least of these, to love God with all we have and likewise love our neighbors as ourselves. We dare not drift from our core mission.

3. *Jesus Christ is Lord.<sup>4</sup>* This most basic Christian affirmation means that all other loyalties are relative rather than absolute. "No one can serve two masters"<sup>5</sup> and no one dare confuse the one true God with other gods.<sup>6</sup> One implication of the lordship of Christ is fierce political independence. We do not belong to any political party, ideology, leader, or nation. The church becomes our primary community of loyalty, and the world as a whole our arena of moral concern, though that concern begins with where God has placed us. We assess earthly politics from within this unassailable structure of loyalty to Christ.

4. *Earthly politics in a sinful world is a necessary but grubby business.* It should be about the quest for the common good but it is at the same time a constant struggle for power, characterized by the constant temptation to do "whatever it takes" to win. In these days, it is filled with hatred. Christians are very easily manipulated and corrupted when they try to play this kind of power politics. As Jesus warned, "The people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light."<sup>7</sup> If we play the world's game in the world's way we will lose every time.

5. *No nation is Christian.* Even where Christianity is or has been (culturally or legally) "established," no nation can be described as Christian. Sin is too deep for that. Biblical Israel struggled to be faithfully Jewish and the church itself struggles to be faithfully Christian. Speaking as a Baptist and out of my own tradition, I declare that we must abandon the dream of Christendom in any form. This is not the political or social change strategy articulated in the New

---

2. 2 Cor 5:19 (all Biblical citations are taken from the New Intl. Version).

3. Matt 10:38-39.

4. Phil 2:9-11.

5. Matt 6:24.

6. Exod 20:3.

7. Luke 16:8.

Testament.

6. *The church is called to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city”<sup>8</sup> in which it dwells.* This call authorizes educational, cultural, moral, and carefully constrained political engagement. All such engagement must be aimed at the good of the whole, not just narrowly understood “Christian” interests. Any engagement must be undertaken in the Spirit of Christ and in a manner consonant with his example and teaching.

7. *The church’s public moral witness must be as comprehensive as possible.* It should be focused on a vision of the human good, of “shalom” at every level of human experience in God’s good creation. We should yearn to see “love and faithfulness meet together, righteousness and peace kiss.”<sup>9</sup> We should seek to honor, protect, and advance abundant life<sup>10</sup> for all, at every stage, and in every condition. This might be called a vital Christian humanism, rooted in a global Kingdom vision, and leading to a consistent ethic of life. It needs to be linked to a vibrant theology of God’s creation and thus issue forth in a commitment to creation care (ecological stewardship) as well.

8. *The church’s moral witness must first be practiced (embodied) in the church itself.*<sup>11</sup> The church is a demonstration community, making plain that the teachings of Jesus are meant to be obeyed and that such obedience brings abundant life. Faithful, disciplined Christian moral practice-in-community is the most significant public moral witness we have available to us.<sup>12</sup> Where we do not live what we teach we call the validity of the teaching itself into question; we also undermine profoundly the cogency of our public moral witness.

#### CONTROVERSIAL OBSERVATIONS

These non-negotiables are hard to contest, though some will do so. But their import becomes most apparent when they are applied to our current evangelical politics. Looking at the evangelical landscape, with its heavy involvement in Christian Right politics, its vocal but small evangelical left, and its nascent evangelical center, I would suggest that the following observations can be made.

*Evangelical Christians have fallen hard for politics.* We are in it up to our eyeballs. It seems to be the main thing we are now known for.

---

8. Jer 29:7.

9. Ps 85:10.

10. John 10:10.

11. Matt 7:21-27.

12. John 13:34-35.

It has distracted us from our primary mission and wounded our witness in the world. We are at risk of becoming just another political party, or constituent part thereof. This shift is really only one generation old. It might win some elections. It is certainly already costing us access to people's hearts, who shut down their openness to our core message because they hate our politics.

*One could easily think that victory in politics has become our primary mission.* A recent story in the New York Times told of an Ohio pastor out and about in his neighborhood.<sup>13</sup> Was he sharing the Gospel? Inviting people to church? No, actually, he was registering voters. Is this really how pastors should be spending their time? Call me old-fashioned, but I think there's something quite wrong here. Perhaps we no longer believe that Jesus saves.

*The heated passions of politics have caused some Christians to abandon love.* This same pastor was interviewed about complaints that Ohio's new voter registration system discriminated against minorities and the poor. The pastor's response? "Quit whining."<sup>14</sup> Nice—if you want to score a point in the culture wars. Not nice, if you care any more about "love, joy, peace, patience," and all those other fruit of the Spirit<sup>15</sup> that are supposed to characterize our way of living. Is this really the spirit we want to demonstrate to the world around us?

*Some of the politically engaged have been tempted to abandon Jesus for Machiavelli.* It is an enduring human temptation. If the cause is just, moral scruples in pursuing that cause are remarkably inconvenient. (Most evil is done for a transcendently "good" cause.) When in trouble, slime your opponent. Spread rumors and lies. After all, it's for "family values" or "justice." (Think about what happened to John McCain in the South Carolina primary in 2000, when cruel and malicious rumors were employed to hurt his standing with the voters of that Bible Belt state.) It is precisely such a temptation that the rigorous moral teaching of the New Testament is intended to train us against.

*The enormous money and power available in worldly politics are beginning to corrupt Christians in politics.* The recent moral downfall of visible politicians claiming Christian identity has deeply embarrassed the Christian witness in this country. The continuing embrace of such

---

13. Ian Urbina, *New Registration Rules Stir Voter Debate in Ohio*, N.Y. Times (Aug. 6, 2006) (available at <http://select.nytimes.com/search/restricted/article?res=F00C17FE355B0C758CDDA10894DE404482>).

14. Russell Johnson, quoted in Ian Urbina, *New Registration Rules Stir Voter Debate in Ohio*, N.Y. Times (Aug. 6, 2006) (available at <http://select.nytimes.com/search/restricted/article?res=F00C17FE355B0C758CDDA10894DE404482>).

15. Gal 5:22-23, one of our cherished memory verses.

people as persecuted Christian martyrs is deeply offensive. I am thinking specifically of Ralph Reed and Tom DeLay and their enmeshment in the Abramoff affair. Both are still treated as Christian heroes by some of the more credulous.

*Evangelical Christians are being manipulated and used by politicians.* Since Reagan, (white) evangelicals have been a part of the Republican electorate. We have been treated as an important interest group, promised much, and given relatively little (despite howls of outrage from the left about our iron grip on power). We are (at least at the grassroots) rather naïve about politics, and too easily deceived by symbolic gestures that cost little, like invitations to the White House, presidential proclamations, and support for measures that everyone knows can't win. We get angry when our deeper goals are frustrated, and when the emptiness of the promises made to us gets exposed. And yet we keep coming back for more. Outsiders should not be overly worried that evangelicals are actually dominating American politics. There is more smoke than fire there.

*Some evangelicals want a Christendom model of church-state relations.* The Left cries "theocracy!" at every sign of evangelical public witness, and this is surely wrong. Yet it is clear from conservative evangelical activism that some (not all) evangelical Christians have never fully assimilated the constitutional idea of religious disestablishment, of a free church in a free state. It's not just on the fringes with the Reconstructionists, a group that believes that the Old Testament law should be passed into American law, including the death penalty for sexual sins. It is apparent in much of our "God and Country" rhetoric, in the fascination with Calvinism and the Puritans that characterizes some within evangelicalism, and even in the rarefied work of certain elite theologians. The Christendom view seems especially apparent in the South, where I live, and where Protestant evangelical religion is more-or-less established to this day. I am not at all sure that the First Amendment would pass today if put to a vote in the old Confederacy.

*Our weak ecclesiology leaves us vulnerable.* Many have noted a general tendency in evangelical life toward a poorly developed theology of the church. This bears bitter fruit here. On the one hand, our pietistic individualism creates a "Jesus and me" ethos that often weakens any loyalty to the community of faith or any willingness to submit to a disciplined covenantal vision. On the other hand, the moral mediocrity of this kind of church leaves us hopeless about the church as the center of God's redemptive enterprise in the world. And so we turn to the state

to enforce the values we can't seem to advance in our own churches. Meanwhile, we probably still go to church, hoping for comfort, cool programs, and some real good singing.

*The backlash against evangelical politics is partly justified.* Certainly part of the backlash is rooted in a secular worldview which seeks a godless public square and, often, promotes values directly opposed to Christian ethical commitments. This gap is largely unbridgeable. But some of the backlash reflects resistance and reaction to the sub-Christian methods and spirit evangelicals often demonstrate. Anger evokes anger, caricature evokes caricature. Christians surely know how to do better than this.

*Evangelicals are deeply compromised by our complicity with state violence.* Whether we support just-war theory or pacifism, Christians are called to resist the descent into violence so characteristic of the sinful human condition. Yet our witness for life is deeply compromised by our often uncritical support for U.S. war fighting, not to mention our apparent ambivalence about torture and our continued strong support for capital punishment. The just war theory means nothing if every war brings out the rally 'round the flag response from Christians. As long as we are unquestioning supporters of every war, and of whatever our troops do in every war, and of every policy dreamed up in every war, we cannot be faithful followers of Jesus Christ the reconciling Lord of the Universe. It is also hard to defend our claim that we are pro-life.

*Some evangelicals are also deeply compromised by their inability to critique American capitalism.* Many have observed that part of the Republican electoral strategy has been to weave together such disparate groups as libertarians, the Chamber of Commerce crowd, and the three times a week churchgoers. The alignment of the latter two groups, in particular, has left evangelicals often unable to offer any critique whatsoever of the domestic or foreign practices of American business—even when those practices actually hurt the economic well-being of these self-same evangelicals. It has also left us easily manipulated by the well-funded activism of businesses such as ExxonMobil when it comes to environmental issues like global warming. The good news here is that this business-evangelical marriage is being challenged strongly from within evangelicalism, with climate change a major battleground. An effort of which I am a part.

*Our unflinching fealty to one political party or leader demonstrates a dangerous lack of prophetic distance.* A good test is this: do we have the capacity to say "No" to our favored party or politician? Can we imagine an occasion in which we might have to dissent? Would we be

willing to lose our access to Karl Rove's or Nancy Pelosi's cell phone number if faithfulness to Jesus Christ required it? Are we okay with being disinvited to the National Prayer Breakfast? Christians know they are in trouble when they find themselves saying yes to policies—like, say, torture—that they would once have never imagined supporting. When the “Christian agenda” happens to align entirely with any party's (evolving) agenda, we are serving some other master than Jesus Christ.

#### A CENTRIST AGENDA

Certainly in terms of political engagement, a centrist agenda is preferable either to a political agenda emerging from the right or the left. The historic 2004 NAE *For the Health of the Nation* statement<sup>16</sup> offers the following moral commitments as central to an evangelical vision. I fully share in these seven principles:

“We work to protect religious freedom and liberty of conscience.” Under this rubric the document strongly reaffirms the First Amendment, taking the “benevolent neutrality” line related to its interpretation. The document embraces a “gospel pluralism” that accepts the inevitability of differences in foundational religious beliefs and requires that people with varying beliefs have the same religious liberties.<sup>17</sup>

“We work to nurture family life and protect children.” The document affirms the centrality of the family as part of the divine plan, treats it as a lifetime relationship between one man and one woman, and catalogs threats to the well-being of the family both from within and from without.<sup>18</sup> It offers a one-sentence rejection of same-sex marriage while more strongly emphasizing the damage caused by divorce and other corrosive threats to family integrity.<sup>19</sup> It says that government does not have the primary responsibility for maintaining healthy family life but that it should do what it can to strengthen families within the limits of its mandate.<sup>20</sup>

“We work to protect the sanctity of human life and to safeguard its nature.” Rooting its stance in the *imago dei*, the document treats abortion, euthanasia, and unethical human experimentation as violations of human dignity. It expresses concern about biotechnological developments and our capacity to place limits on them for the sake of

---

16. Natl. Assn. of Evangelicals, *For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility* (available at [http://www.nae.net/images/civic\\_responsibility.pdf](http://www.nae.net/images/civic_responsibility.pdf)); also in *Toward an Evangelical Public Policy* 363-375 (Ronald J. Sider & Diane Knippers eds., Baker 2005).

17. *Id.* at 6.

18. *Id.* at 7.

19. *Id.* at 7-8.

20. *Id.* at 7.

the uniqueness of human nature. It opposes human cloning and embryonic stem-cell research as well as genetic discrimination.

“We seek justice and compassion for the poor and vulnerable.” The NAE declaration here expresses concern not just for the poor but also women, children, the aged, persons with disabilities, immigrants, refugees, minorities, the persecuted, and prisoners.<sup>21</sup> “God measures societies by how they treat the people at the bottom.”<sup>22</sup> It takes an equality of opportunity rather than equality of outcome stance on economic life, supports work-based social welfare programs where possible, and addresses global aid and trade policies and their effect on the poor. It calls for robust private and governmental support of effective international aid agencies.<sup>23</sup> The document names the raft of social problems that affect the developing world and encourages systemic Christian and government intervention to change these conditions, such as the spread of HIV/AIDS, slavery and sex trafficking, extreme poverty, and political corruption.

“We work to protect human rights.” Again grounding its stance in an *imago dei* religious ethic, the NAE statement declares the existence of God-given rights—and responsibilities. The list includes not just political and procedural rights but also the right to “food, nurture, shelter, and care.” It calls on all governments to respect human rights and the American government to reward countries that do the same while punishing those that do not. The document emphasizes religious liberty, including the right to change one’s religion.<sup>24</sup> The document names America’s own major rights violations, especially the mistreatment of Native Americans and African Americans, and calls on churches to “model good race relations” while pressing for efforts to “correct the lingering effects of our racist history.”<sup>25</sup>

“We seek peace and work to restrain violence.” The NAE statement calls for the peaceful settlement of disputes in view of the coming peaceable kingdom. While embracing just-war principles for guiding the use of force, it also calls for Christians to participate in practical peacemaking initiatives.

“We labor to protect God’s creation.” This seventh and final statement clearly places the NAE on record as supporting a Christian version of environmental concern. It embraces the principles of

---

21. *Id.* at 8-9.

22. *Id.* at 9.

23. *Id.*

24. *Id.* at 10.

25. *Id.* at 11.

dominion, stewardship, and sustainability,<sup>26</sup> as well as the government's "obligation to protect its citizens from the effects of environmental degradation." Among other measures, it calls for government to "encourage fuel efficiency, reduce pollution, encourage sustainable use of natural resources, and provide for the proper care of wildlife and their natural habitats."<sup>27</sup>

#### BACK TO BASICS

While I resonate strongly with this kind of vision, I still find myself recoiling from the increasing centrality of politics in evangelicalism, and am instead driven back to the basics of orthodox, evangelical Christianity. Surely I will continue to engage in public moral witness along the lines suggested by Biblical faith as I understand it. But the journey that began with a conversion experience in a Baptist church almost thirty years ago has circled round again to that starting point. The good folks of Providence Baptist Church—who loved a wretch like me and helped midwife my salvation—told me in 1978 that Christian existence looks something like this:

Christians read their Bibles every day, focusing especially on the teachings of Jesus.

Christians pray hard: for a lost and broken world, for their enemies, and for their own forgiveness and growth.

Christians are morally serious people, expected to live right for their Lord Jesus.

Christians are deeply committed to a local church, and serve there faithfully.

Christians are focused on preaching the Gospel and winning the lost.

Christians serve the least of these in missions and ministry here and around the world.

Christian pastors shepherd their flocks more than full-time; they don't do politics.

Christians are ready to give a reason for the hope (and conviction) that is in us, but always peaceably.

Christians exalt the love of God and love of neighbor as their highest responsibilities.

Christians look with joy for the return of Jesus Christ, when all shall be set right, and every tear is finally wiped away.

---

26. *Id.*

27. *Id.* at 12.

*I think the challenge for evangelical Christians is simply to try to remember how to be Christians again, even while we remain engaged with the public life of our nation.*